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# Making Baltimore Safer

By 1999, Baltimore had become the most violent, addicted, and abandoned city in America. But by the mayoral race later that year, we were all sick and tired of open-air drug markets and violent crime. We were looking for new leadership to pull us together, and that is what we voted for. We were looking for new ways to make our city a safer place.

And CompStat delivered.

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## Campaigning for Crime Reduction

On June 20, 1999, at the age of thirty-six, I announced that I was running for mayor. With my wife Katie and just a handful of friends at my side, my announcement speech was short and to the point.

"...Hear me, Baltimore. Six months after I take office, the open-air drug market of this corner and nine others will be things of our city's past. In the second year, twenty more open-air drug corners will likewise be shut down, and, thus, will the people of this city easily measure our success or failure. When we make fighting crime and closing down open-air markets the top priority of Baltimore City government, then, and only then will we be able to build a stable and growing city tax base. Then, and only then, will we dramatically improve schools. Then, and only then, will the new jobs created by increased private investment be things of our city's present and future..."

The day I announced, I was the first choice of just 7 percent of my neighbors. My two primary opponents were both African American office-holders in a majority African American city, and both polled with more than 80 percent name recognition.

There would only be eighty-six days from announcement day to the primary election. Every single day of the campaign was difficult. Every conversation of the campaign involved difficult questions of racial injustice and law enforcement. Citizens rightly demanded to know how I intended to hold the police accountable to the law and the Constitution as I pushed them at the same time to shut down open-air drug markets. The term "zero-tolerance" became a double-edged term. For some, it meant we would no

*In the thirty years leading up to 1999, Baltimore lost more of its population than any other major city in America. Across whole neighborhoods of East and West Baltimore, open-air drug markets and violent crime accelerated the flight—leaving behind thousands of vacant and abandoned homes.*

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longer tolerate open-air drug markets to terrorize our poorest neighborhoods. For others, it meant we would run roughshod over individual freedoms and constitutional rights.

We released two policy booklets in the early weeks of the campaign. The first was exclusively focused on how to reduce violent crime and hold the police accountable. The second was about everything else—improving public schools, job creation, housing, public health, parks, and transportation.

At an early candidate forum in front of Baltimore's business leaders, the three of us were asked if any of us would commit to cutting crime in half during our term of office. Only I said yes. The others had many reasons why no one could really make a promise like that. I answered with a plan. I also asked that they hold me accountable to that commitment.

We started to pick up key endorsements of black and white neighborhood leaders across the city, and then even some elected officials started to endorse. The campaign grew every day. It grew to fill an already large consensus. For most of us had come to believe that until we made our city safer, our city didn't have much of a future.

In the final days of the campaign, one of my opponents sent out a jumbo postcard mailer with a grainy picture of Rodney King being beaten by white police officers in California. It asked in large print: "Are you ready for zero-tolerance?" On the back of the postcard was a picture of my white face.

The *Baltimore Sun* endorsed one of my opponents. Police and fire unions endorsed the other. But on Election Day, we won with 54 percent of the vote. In fact, we won each of the six City Council districts of the city—defeating both opponents in their own districts.

Now it was time to govern. It was time to shut down our first ten deadly open-air drug markets as we had promised. It was the critical first step in our drive to make our city safer.

And CompStat would be our method.

## Enter Jack Maple

The first time I spoke to Jack Maple was the day after my own Election Day. As luck, or Providence, would have it, he and his business partner, John Linder were in Washington, DC—just an hour down the road. They agreed to meet me for dinner that night at a little Italian place called Maria's on Connecticut Avenue.

After a long dinner that night, Jack agreed to come help Baltimore but with one confidential caveat. He was fighting cancer. The prognosis was not good. And he could only be involved for as long as his health allowed.

As fate would have it, I'd be the last mayor to benefit from Jack's compassion, expertise, and counsel in reforming a police department. And the first mayor, with Jack's help, to take CompStat enterprise-wide for the whole of city government.

Thanks to philanthropic business and foundation leaders, we were able to raise the money necessary to hire Maple and Linder and put them to work in Baltimore. As Maple assessed data systems and extracted hard counts of deployment and sworn strength and equipment, Linder went to work conducting dozens of focus groups across every imaginable slice of the Baltimore Police Department—young officers and old officers, sergeants and lieutenants, male and female officers, black and white officers. It was the first time that the clear majority had ever been asked their opinions about crime-fighting and the strengths and weaknesses of their own police department. But it would not be the last time.

All this intense listening would be used to design a polling questionnaire that every member of the department would be asked, but not compelled, to complete. The goal was to give every member of the

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Police Department some ownership of the change and reform that was coming—a sense that they were recognized and heard, and even helping to shape the improvements we all wanted to see.

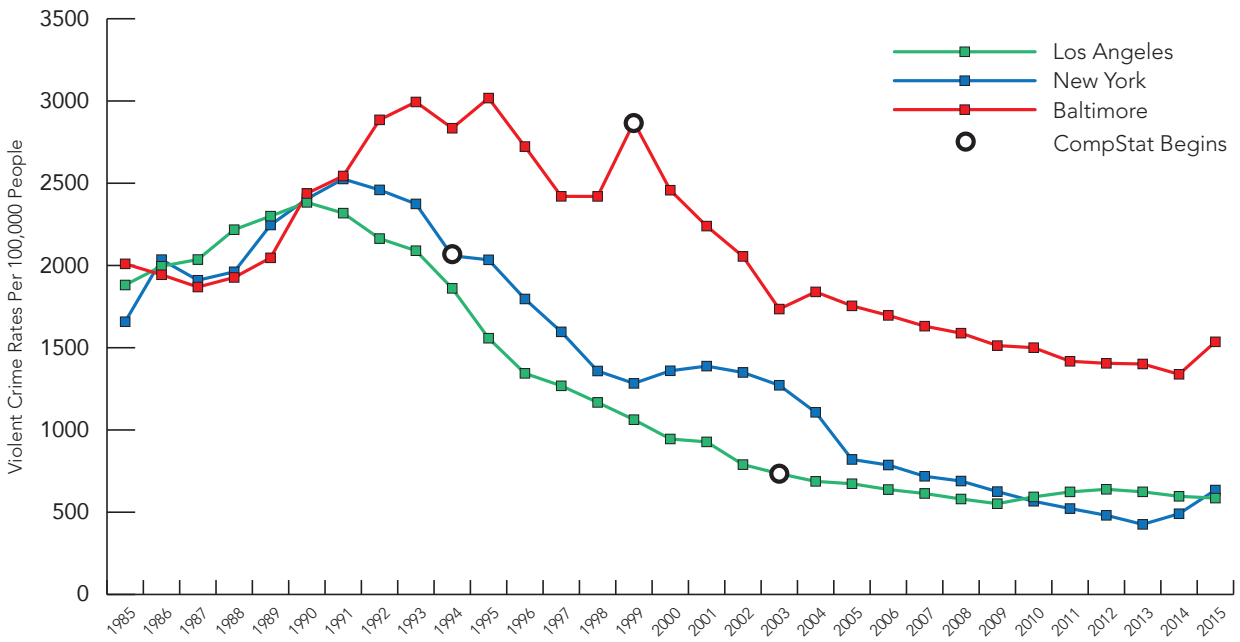
The plan was for the new police commissioner to send the polling questionnaire out to the department over his signature. The wording of every question—based on language and substance gleaned from the focus groups—would communicate that their new leader felt their pain and understood their hopes, desires, and frustrations. The results of the poll would be made public for all to see. And the reformation would begin.

We vowed to one another never to relent, and never to let up. This would be a long, uphill push.

## Building Out a Proper CompStat Room

It is said that form follows function. And this is certainly true when it comes to the CompStat Room (capital R intentional.) It is also said that expectations become behavior. And there is an expectation created by a proper CompStat Room.

Soon hammers were swinging, and drywall was going up over at the fourth floor of the Police Department headquarters building. Under Maple's supervision, a new and permanent CompStat Room was under construction. Gone were the days of the occasional *faux* CompStat, where once a month a projector was slapped on top of a card table in the police auditorium. Faux CompStat was little more than a slide show of numbers without honest dialogue or discussion about how to solve a murder, shooting, or armed robbery problem. It was a dog-and-pony imitation of the real thing.




*This graph highlights the decline in violent crime rates in New York, Baltimore, and Los Angeles, and notes when CompStat was introduced in each city. It also shows crime rising again in Baltimore as city and police leaders stopped using CompStat.*

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We spared no expense in building out a new CompStat Room in the newest section of the Police Department headquarters. And everything about the new CompStat Room said permanent—a permanent array of desks in a horseshoe formation for the citywide police command staff; permanent projectors mounted in the ceiling; a permanent glass-enclosed booth for the staff from Planning and Research to follow the conversation and project the corresponding maps, charts, and graphs; permanent big-screen monitors mounted on the walls; and a permanent podium up front where the district commander flanked by his district command staff would present—the focal point, really, of every meeting.

This would be the collaborative nerve center of Baltimore's new crime fight. And everything about that room said we were in it to win it, and there would be no turning back.

Another seed planted.

That CompStat Room also became the prototype for the new CitiStat Room that was soon under construction on the sixth floor of City Hall. The space was personally chosen by Jack Maple after touring every square foot of City Hall.

In the year that followed, several other departmental stat rooms would also be constructed in other buildings, ushering in a new way of governing across the entire City of Baltimore.

*When our federal government helped us hire an additional 200 police officers, we had a decision to make. Do we divide the additional officers equally among the six City Council districts, or do we send them to small areas where the greatest numbers of our citizens were being shot, robbed, and mugged year in and year out? We went with the second option, and put our city on a path for the biggest ten-year crime reduction of any major city in the US.*

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## Closing Open-Air Drug Markets

The leading promise of the campaign for mayor was that, together, we would close ten open-air drug markets within my first six months in office. In hindsight, such an undertaking seems quaint and small. But for a city that had seen these open-air drug markets expand unabated for twenty years, it was, at the time, a bold and crystallizing moment of accountability. None of the other candidates could bring themselves to make such a seemingly impossible commitment.

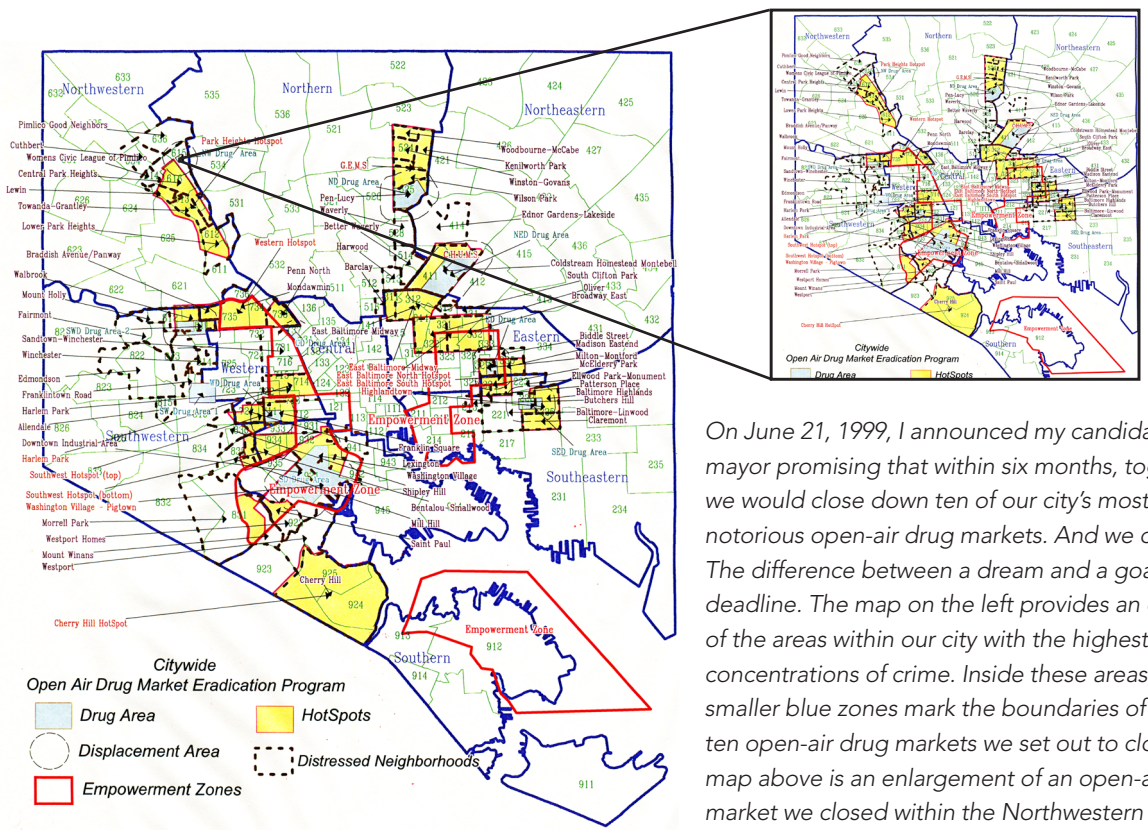
If you believe you can or you believe you can't, you are probably right. So, we chose to believe we could. But there is a big difference between saying it and doing it.

We put together the plan for closing these first ten open-air drug markets in a way that was both collaborative and data-based. We reached out broadly and brought several different groups of stakeholders into our expanding circle of decision-making. Many of the people involved in formulating the plan and determining the metes and bounds of the first areas to liberate were from inside government. Many others were neighborhood leaders and activists from outside of city government.

The one thing all of us had in common was a love for this valuable piece of the map of the United States called the City of Baltimore.

In fact, almost every one of these conversations happened around a map. And on this map, staring us all in the face, were plotted the requests for police service—the 911 calls: for open-air drug dealing, for drug dealing from within an address, for shots fired, for murder, for robbery, and for every other type of 911 call.

The map told a story. And our story was that we had let open-air drug markets operate with impunity




*On June 21, 1999, I announced my candidacy for mayor promising that within six months, together, we would close down ten of our city's most notorious open-air drug markets. And we did. The difference between a dream and a goal is a deadline. The map on the left provides an overview of the areas within our city with the highest concentrations of crime. Inside these areas, the smaller blue zones mark the boundaries of the first ten open-air drug markets we set out to close. The map above is an enlargement of an open-air drug market we closed within the Northwestern District.*

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over whole swaths of our city. And the common denominator of the neighborhoods we had collectively written off was that they were all poor, and most of them were black.

But the map also told us that the areas we had to reclaim were not massive and boundless. In fact, when compared to much larger cities like New York and Los Angeles, they were compact and finite with easily identified borders. And even within neighborhood borders, certain hot spots became clearly visible when calls for service from citizens were mapped for everyone to see.

The designation of the boundaries would not be our most advanced use of data-driven decision-making. But it was the best we could do at the time. Neighborhood leaders from every part of the city generously came together in evening meetings to look over the maps and the data showing where various crimes were happening. Each map was ground-truthed with community input, experience, and knowledge. And some boundaries of these initial areas were also determined by hard-to-measure factors like the level of committed neighborhood leadership support.

Some in the Baltimore Police Department wanted more time to get the boundaries of these first ten areas perfect, or to get our preparation just right. But we didn't have more time. The people and I had agreed that we would close the first ten open-air drug markets within our first six months together. I was intent on keeping my part of that bargain.

We were elected to govern right now, not later. The people elected us to deliver results. We had six months to make the difference we had promised. And we would have to trust that the public would be smart enough to recognize progress even if—in some ways—it fell short of the goal.

What we needed was a beachhead. Geographically and politically.

"Was this about politics or public safety?" some would ask.

The answer was: "Yes."

It was about politics *and* it was about public safety—it was about the future of our city. Murders were now higher this year than the prior year.

We had to begin. And we had to see with our own eyes that we could succeed for a change.

## A "Whole of Government" Approach

Ours was a "whole of government" approach. And it would become a whole city approach.

Eradicating these first ten open-air drug markets became every department's business. Solid Waste, Transportation, Housing, and Health. Reducing crime—and the conditions that lead to crime—was everyone's business.

In every step of the work, from the initial setting of boundaries for heightened attention and enforcement, to the initial walk-through, to follow-up inspections, neighborhood leaders were invited and encouraged to accompany city and police officials every step of the way.

Complaints about burned-out street lights of course came in from all over the city. We prioritized for the fastest service those complaints that came in from neighborhoods hardest hit by crime. We did the same with illegal dumping, abandoned cars, dead trees, and vacant houses. Instead of hoping for the complaints to be called in by demoralized and long-suffering citizens, we sent inspectors in as collaborative teams from multiple departments—during the day, and at night—to generate work orders to address these quality-of-life issues more pro-actively.

Selecting the initial ten areas took a lot of internal debate and hours and hours of meetings and honest discussions with neighborhood leaders. Every hard-hit neighborhood in the city—and there were many—wanted to be in that first group of ten. Not a single neighborhood asked for less police attention or less enforcement.

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Some counseled that we should not publicize the drug areas we were working to close until after we had succeeded. Others counseled that we should have fifteen or twenty "secret" areas that we set out to close and then share the most successful ten with the press when the six-month deadline arrived. Cute.

"How will that help us motivate neighbors, churches, and businesses in the areas we are fighting to reclaim?" I asked.

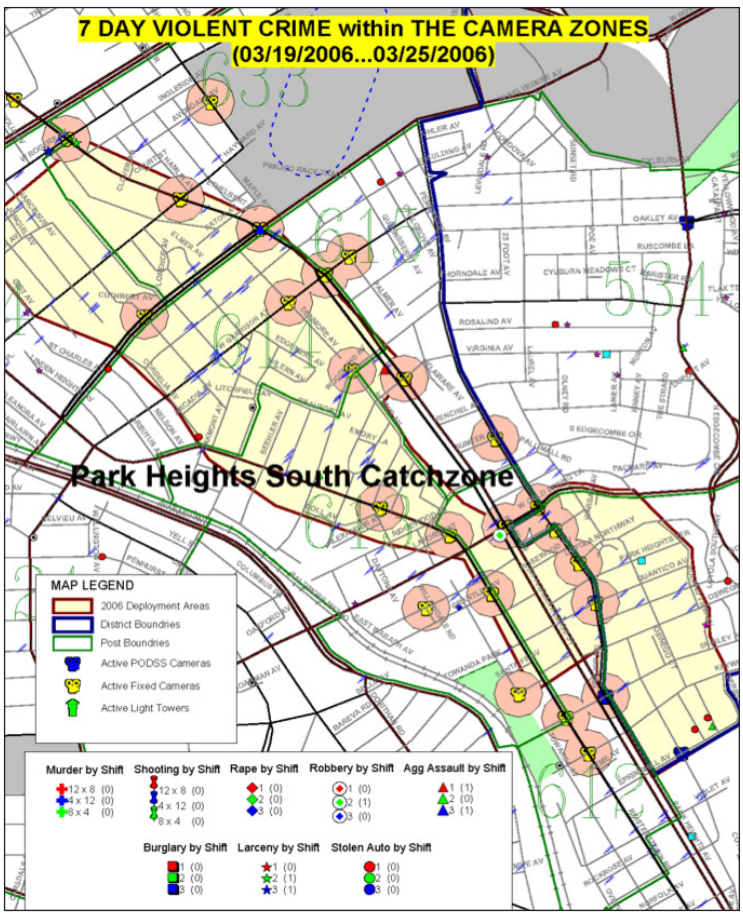
Some of my staff were afraid. But they were afraid of the wrong things. They were afraid I would be hurt politically if we failed. After all, no one else had succeeded at this for decades here.

"Why will police officers risk their lives," I asked, "if their civil leaders don't have the guts to risk their own precious political capital?"

The press openly doubted the sincerity of my commitment. After twenty years of seeing so many of our neighborhoods go from bad to worse, it was hard to blame them. Some of them seemed anxious for us to make news by failing. And they knew we would fail because "all the smart people" knew it could never be done, here.

On February 1, 2000, we held a press conference to announce the first ten open-air drug markets that we would close. The location we chose for the press conference was Harford Road and The Alameda—the same corner where I had announced our campaign for mayor months earlier.

We put forward both the plan and the map. The how and the where. Larger maps of each designated




*A CompStat map showing a seven day snapshot of crime in the Park Heights of Baltimore area in March 2006. Multiple overlays include the locations of cameras designed to detect crimes in the deployment focus area at that point in time.*

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# Governing for Results: Making Progress on Drugs

The open-air drug markets were the relatively tiny square blocks of our city where drive-by shootings and retaliatory homicides happened with the greatest concentrated frequency, year in and year out. A national television series had even been aired, portraying the seeming hopelessness of ever recovering peace on these notorious Baltimore corners. So, we vowed to close them.

On Thursday, June 8, 2000, *Baltimore Sun* writer Peter Herman acknowledged that violence and drug deals were declining in targeted areas across the city:

> "Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley's pledge to reclaim 10 drug-infested areas within six months of taking office has been largely fulfilled, police said yesterday, with crime down and fewer people complaining about dealers and addicts.
>
> "Homicides and shootings also dropped on streets surrounding the designated drug markets, which police say shows they are not simply shuffling the drug trade from one block to another.
>
> "'The liberation of Baltimore's neighborhoods has begun,' O'Malley said yesterday while standing at North Rose Street and Ashland Avenue, ground zero for a band of frustrated residents who have confronted dealers."

Even the ultra-skeptical *Baltimore Sun* had something half-encouraging to say about this new "effort" in Baltimore's fight against crime. Though, understandably, with murders still up, they could not call it "progress." In a June 11, 2000, editorial, they wrote:

> "After the first six months, the jury is still out on the mayor's effectiveness. He has raised expectations by setting goals and making announcements. But he has yet to show major achievements. While the mayor has made good on his campaign promise to shut down 10 of the worst open-air drug markets, drug-related killings have continued unabated. At the current rate, this year will again end with more than 300 homicides—for the 11th consecutive time.
>
> "The mayor's vigorous style, nevertheless, has produced a sense of hope unfelt in Baltimore for more than a decade."

We were making progress. But, we had more work to do.

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